

Depicting and describing (Bacchus and) Ariadne: Titian, ancient painting, and Catullus

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Titian's 'Bacchus and Ariadne', an oil painting created in the 1520s for an Italian ducal palace, now hangs in the National Gallery in London. In his sixty-fourth poem, Catullus claims to describe a picture of a very similar scene. Here Gail Trimble explores how looking at the painting and the poem together can help us to appreciate the ways in which writers and visual artists use their distinctive art forms to respond to Classical myth and to each other.

Standing in front of Titian's 'Bacchus and Ariadne' in the National Gallery, how would you describe it? You might start by talking about the overall visual impression it makes: its bright colours and dramatic action. You would probably then describe its figures: perhaps first the near-naked young man jumping from his chariot and the woman turning round to look at him, and then the crowd filling most of the painting, including women with musical instruments, a bearded man wrapped in a snake, a boy with the legs of a goat, a pair of cheetahs, a dog. If you know the relevant Classical mythology, you might go further, explaining that the young man is a god, Bacchus or Dionysus, accompanied as usual by maenads, satyrs, and Silenus, arriving on the island of Naxos to discover Ariadne, a mortal heroine who will become his divine wife.

At that stage you might say why Ariadne found herself on Naxos. She has been abandoned there by her faithless lover Theseus, so the tiny ship visible over her left shoulder must be his. And what had happened between Ariadne and Theseus before their relationship ended so disastrously? You might explain that Ariadne was a Cretan princess, and had fallen in love with Theseus and helped him to kill the Minotaur which her father Minos kept in the Labyrinth. Noticing the stars in the sky, you might also explain that after the events of this picture, Bacchus will honour Ariadne by turning her crown into a constellation. Rather than describ-

ing a picture, you would now be telling a story.

Theseus, Ariadne, and Bacchus in Roman wall-painting

The part of Ariadne's story that takes place on Naxos is represented in several wall-paintings that survive from Pompeii and Herculaneum. However, not all of them choose to depict the same moment that Titian does, or even exactly the same version of events.

One possibility was to show the treacherous Theseus creeping onto his ship as Ariadne lies innocently sleeping behind him. Another, exemplified by a painting from Herculaneum now in the British Museum (see p. 16), was to represent Ariadne looking out, often pointing or weeping, as Theseus sails away. But most pictures of Bacchus discovering Ariadne do not illustrate the next logical stage in the story, with the god interrupting the heroine's mourning as in Titian's painting. Instead, Bacchus arrives – with his maenads and other followers – while Ariadne still sleeps, as in the painting from Pompeii on p. 16. In this version, Ariadne will not wake to disappointment and misery, but, presumably, will immediately forget Theseus' betrayal as she begins her new life with her divine husband.

Ariadne's sleep, which gives Theseus his opportunity to desert her, is important for a central concern of these paintings: the way they deal with gazes, with who is

Titian (Tiziano Vecelli, c. 1490–1576) was one of the most important members of the 'Venetian' school of painting that flourished in the sixteenth century. He was an extremely versatile painter, equally at home with portraits, landscapes, or, as here, mythological and religious themes.

looking at whom. While Theseus moves away from Ariadne – sometimes not without a glance back at her – she either stares intensely at his departing ship, or, still asleep, is in a position of vulnerability, seeing nothing at all. She is just as vulnerable in the pictures in which Bacchus finds her asleep and looks at her: here, as when Ariadne is awake and gazing at Theseus, the gaze represents erotic desire.

Catullus 64 and its picture of Ariadne

Although these Roman paintings probably date from not long before Pompeii and Herculaneum were destroyed in A.D. 79, it is likely that they show us ways of representing Ariadne in a picture that Roman audiences might have been familiar with in the 50s B.C., when Catullus wrote his sixty-fourth poem.

Catullus is most famous for his love poetry and often obscene invectives, but he also wrote longer poems in more 'important' genres. Catullus 64 is the longest, but at just over 400 lines is still very short for its genre, mythological epic. It tells the story of the wedding of Peleus and Thetis, the parents of Achilles; but for the narrator of the poem, the most important aspect of this wedding seems to be the picture of Ariadne woven or embroidered on the coverlet of the couple's marriage bed. More than half the poem is an *ecphrasis* (Greek for 'description') of this coverlet.

Instead of mentioning the artist's

colours or technique, this description goes straight to Ariadne herself:

*Thesea cedentem celeri cum classe tuetur
indomitos in corde gerens Ariadna furores,
necdum etiam sese quae uisit uisere credit,
utpote fallaci quae tum primum excita somno
desertam in sola miseram se cernat harena*
(53–7)

*Ariadne sees Theseus departing with
his swift ship, bearing in her heart
uncontrollable fury; nor yet can she
believe she sees what she is seeing: no
wonder, since just then woken from
deceiving sleep she sees herself, poor
thing, abandoned on the lonely sand.*

It seems that this picture looks like the painting from Herculaneum, with the despairing Ariadne looking out at the departing Theseus. The narrator is clearly struck by Ariadne's unhappiness, even becoming emotional himself and calling her 'poor thing'. He presumably infers this unhappiness from Ariadne's appearance, and he is also already inferring other parts of the story: what has just happened (Ariadne has just woken up) and what is about to happen (she doesn't yet believe her eyes, but she soon will).

Although he includes some more physical description, notably seeming to enjoy describing how all Ariadne's clothes have fallen off, this narrator soon wants to give a further explanation of Ariadne's emotions. To do so, he stops describing the picture and simply begins the story of how Theseus came to Crete, using the epic formula 'they say' to show that his source is now the verbal tradition of mythology, not the picture on the coverlet.

Most of Catullus' *ecphrasis*, then, is not actually a description, but an epic story, marked with several more instances of 'they say'. We hear how Theseus killed the Minotaur, and then, back on Naxos, how Ariadne made a long speech ending with a curse on him, fulfilled when Jupiter made Theseus forget to change his black sails to white ones, causing his father Aegeus to commit suicide in the belief that he was dead. This story takes about 200 lines to tell, and many readers probably forget that it began with a description of a picture.

Titian and Catullus

However, just when the story seems finished, Catullus' narrator returns to describing 'another part' of the picture:

*at parte ex alia florens uolitabat Iacchus
cum thiaso Satyrorum et Nysigenis Silenis,
te quaerens, Ariadna, tuoque incensus amore*
(251–3)

*But in another part, Bacchus in bloom
was flying with his troop of satyrs and
Nysa-born Sileni, looking for you,
Ariadne, and inflamed with love of*

you.

We suddenly discover that this picture doesn't look like the Herculaneum painting after all, but includes Bacchus and a large group of maenads, which Catullus describes. Perhaps it looks a bit like another wall-painting from Pompeii, now known only from a nineteenth-century print, in which Bacchus arrives behind Ariadne as she looks out to sea. But in that painting, Bacchus and his friends stand quietly, as if not yet wanting to disturb Ariadne. In the picture as described by Catullus, though, the bacchantes are tossing the limbs of a calf about and playing screeching music. Even 'in another part' of the picture, it is incredible that Ariadne has not noticed them.

Returning to Titian's painting, we can see how the artist has used Catullus' text. As well as Ariadne's fallen clothes and Bacchus' 'flying' leap, Titian includes every detail of Catullus' description of the bacchantes: the bits of dead calf, the snakes, the specific instruments (cymbals, horns, and tambourines) and, in the background, the wicker basket carrying mysterious Dionysiac objects. But Titian reacts to Catullus more polemically, too. His Ariadne is not still looking at Theseus while the noise and excitement happens behind her. Perhaps in a comment on Catullus' lack of realism – as well as a move giving Ariadne just a little more power – she has half-turned round to look at her future husband.

Catullus' tendentious description

Looking at these ancient and Renaissance paintings along-side Catullus 64 allows us to appreciate just how strange is the poem's description of a picture that, it turns out, looks very like Titian's. Where you might have begun by describing a busy, crowded picture full of different figures, Catullus' narrator spends nine-tenths of his *ecphrasis* ignoring nine-tenths of the picture and focusing only on the motionless Ariadne. And the story he tells about her covers only her past, not her future with Bacchus.

Perhaps this simply means that Catullus' narrator enjoys showing off his power over his readers, reminding us at the end of the *ecphrasis* that we can't see the picture that he claims to see. Perhaps it shows him exploring how viewers may be drawn to the perspective of just one character in a picture: he is so interested in Ariadne that he shares only her viewpoint until he suddenly looks at 'another part' of the picture, and then turns to share Bacchus' viewpoint, looking at Ariadne in a different way, perhaps with erotic desire. But perhaps it suggests that the narrator has a personal reason for this strangely biased description. We might start to wonder – especially if we want to identify

the unnamed narrator of Catullus 64 with the 'Catullus' of Catullus' personal poetry – whether he is unhappy (in love?) himself.

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